

Book Review

Woods, M. (2011). **Rural**. S. Holloway & G. Valentine (Ed.)

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by Vikneswaran Nair & Natalie King, Taylor's University, Malaysia

What do we understand by the term, 'rural'? The segmentation of 'rural' and 'urban' has been deeply engrained in our culture. History has shown that the term rural has been ascribed many connotations and denotations - as a source of food and energy; as a pristine wilderness or as a rustic paradise; as a playground or a place of escape; as a delicate space of nature in need of protection; and as a primitive place in need of transformation. But how relevant and significant is the idea of the rural today?

In his book, *Rural*, Michael Woods mainly focused on developed nations' ideologies of what is rural even though the author mentioned that case studies of developing countries would be acknowledged. The book provides an advanced understanding of the study of rural places geographically and in related disciplines. Hence, the main target audience are academics and researchers in the fields of geography, sociology and anthropology. The author compiled and critically reviewed several authors' work in light of providing a clear usage and meaning of spatial concepts of rural.

Although rural areas are rich in land, the poverty rate is still alarmingly notable. Small scale farmers are not given a fair price and the wealth is unevenly distributed to large scale operations and middle men.

The book, segmented into nine chapters, delivers an up-to-date reading of the current literature in rural geography in terms of the theoretical development of rural studies and is supported by relevant case studies.

Chapter 1 initiates the introduction of the upcoming chapters and the basic reasons for continual studies of the rural concept. It refers to the past, as it is now in the present and forward-looking perspectives through the eyes of the academic world. He cites past research mapping rural areas for reasons of systemic agricultural geography using models such as the 'concentric model' of von Thünen in 1826 and 'central place theory' of Walter Christaller in 1933. However, in recent decades the

Correspondence: Associate Professor Dr Vikneswaran Nair; Natalie King, Graduate Student
School of Hospitality, Tourism & Culinary Arts, Taylor's University
Email: vicky.nair@taylors.edu.my; natoking@yahoo.com

concept of human geography has widened the perspective of a broader study that includes socio-economic and political realities.

The author seeks to differentiate between the functionality of city and country using a geographical stance. Rural has roots in Latin as an adjective linked to the Latin noun *rus*, meaning 'an open area'. Through the progression of time, the word rural has also been interchangeably used in several forms with similar meanings and connotations such as rurality, countryside and country (Latin origin meaning 'the land spread out around one'). The chapter concludes with the introduction of the main scope and structure of the book leaning towards the development of the 'three-fold model of rural space forms'.

Subsequently, Chapter 2 focuses on 'rural' in terms of production and a reproduction of its historical remnants of medieval Europe and North America, media representations and the relationship between rural and urban. During the colonisation era, rural spaces were seen as 'wilderness alien rural' that should be replaced with more familiar representations of pastoral landscape. However, during the 19th century, the notion of preserving and conserving the rural became an interest, gaining importance through the establishment of the first National Park 'Yellowstone' in Wyoming 1872. In this chapter, the author also includes the shift from quantifying the rural through research and to a more 'relational approach' using Human Geography to include other dimensions in rethinking the meaning of rural as a way of life.

In the author's opinion, this approach will make way for a clearer view of redefining rural. Although the book gives good insights into the past and present notions of rural, no attempt has been made to redefine rural in any broad or specific context.

In Chapter 3, though the author mentions other developing countries, the focus is on European idylls of land use for production, commercialisation and industrialisation. The author emphasises his point using the concepts of 'Green Revolution' and 'multifunctional agricultural regimes'. To critique, farming is not seen as a prestigious activity today; it has provoked conflict with environmentalists and health activists due to 'super-productivism' practices. To the concerns of many, organic food products have gained recognition; however, it is greatly dependent on the willingness-to-pay of the consumer for a product seen as premier.

In this chapter, the author had written about 'multifunctional agricultural regimes' which were introduced in the late 1990s intertwining the concepts of sustainability and tourism. In Chapter 4, the author highlights the commodification of rurality through tourism marketing via visual aspects of the human senses. However, as a product matures, the destination image may change once the visible capacity has been consumed to the maximum. The book does not place much emphasis on the carrying

capacity or limits of acceptable change (LAC) which is one of the main academic concerns as it relates to sustainable tourism ventures.

Chapter 5 focuses on rural development strategies and modernisation of rural areas from 1920s onwards through its four focal points of agriculture, economic, infrastructure and social. However, as noted by the author, through his examples, this had mainly taken place in Europe and North America using agriculture as a base for economic growth. The author uses China as an example of a developing country which progressed to modernisation, but is criticised for its forced displacement of rural China.

The new paradigm of endogenous rural development has its focus on bottom-up approach empowering communities to seeking sustainable economic benefits. The author does not mention Pro-Poor Tourism as another concept that encourages rural development. However, he briefly explains community-centred rural development which is similarly related to community-based tourism. Such ventures are tested worldwide but if basic infrastructure and human resource development is lacking, growth may stagnate. This is especially true when initial agencies such as the non-governmental organisations (NGO) who initiated the programme, leave when funds dwindle.

In Chapter 6, 'Living in the Rural', the author bases his discussion on Halfacree's three-fold model of rural space, introduced in Chapter 1. Studies of rural communities have taken an ethnographic approach to the extent of engaging daily livelihood in an attempt to understand the symbolism of their meaning of the sense of belonging. The author also touches on 'out-migration' especially the younger generation leaving for employment and education and seldom returning to the community. This is coupled with the opposite effect of 'in-migration' of foreign immigrants which may become a concern for contradictory community assumptions of intentions of the 'newcomer'. An insight to rural life and the co-existence of humans and non-humans is briefly noted.

In Chapter 7, through tourism, rural performance is seen as a norm to the extent that it is staged to enhance the product of a community way-of-life. The author touches on the use of music, dance, folklore, gastronomy, hunting, festival and agriculture shows throughout Europe and the English countryside. The author also mentions hunting, as a ritual or rite of passage and performance of the English countryside. In recent decades, due to depletion of certain species, 'animal rights' groups have put increased pressure on hunting.

Definitions of rurality have changed throughout history. In setting policies, the gap in defining, describing and locating rural has led to difficulties in conceptualising a clear definition. Most policies are set through a top-down approach with little or

no inclusion of rural communities. Therefore, questions arise as “to what extent can rural communities be governed especially in areas where in their social structure already exists a ‘village head’.” As outlined in Chapter 8, certain approaches to a workable political ideology have brought about the concept of Neoliberalism which includes trade liberalisation and foreign direct investment (FDI). However, some believe that this is yet another mode of driving the wealth in one direction towards the larger corporations and is not in favour of small scale enterprises.

Furthermore, neoliberalisation of nature is also seen by the use of policies and regulations often set by international bodies such as the European Union (EU) and World Trade Organisation (WTO). Although this concept has worked in certain aspects of empowering local communities and halting environmental degradation, problems still arise when local communities engage in traditional activities that may be termed as breaking the policies.

The final chapter (Chapter 9) incorporates lessons learnt from previous chapters and the characteristics of the emergent global countryside. This chapter also covers aspects of sustainable renewable energy, climate change and indigenous peoples’ concerns of environmental damage and cultural fabrication.

However, in terms of the reader gaining a wider perspective of rurality on an international arena, this book may not give that insight as it is mainly based on European and North American dominance of past and present rural societies in the realm of agriculture-based activities. Although the book has not given new definitions for rural, it highlights points in Chapter 9 for future thought when seeking to redefine rural perhaps in the context of a region or even country.